Native Americans here first

By PAMELA ENDZWEIG

What Capt. Robert Gray and his men found on May 11, 1792, upon crossing the treacherous bar at the mouth of the Columbia River, was a far cry from unoccupied virgin territory. As Gray's fifth mate, John Boit, observed, "The beach was lin'd with Natives, who ran along ashore following the ship." Soon after the ship's arrival, it was approached by more than 20 canoes, their occupants bringing furs and salmon to trade. For the duration of the crew's sojourn, in Boit's words, "Vast many canoes full of Indians from different parts of the river were constantly along side."

Boit's account documents the crew's first encounter with the Chinook and Clatsop, masters in a far-reaching native trade, who by virtue of their location at the gateway to the Pacific Ocean were to become key players in both the maritime and land-based fur trade of the Pacific Northwest.

Situated at the mouth of the Columbia River, the Chinook and the Clatsop spoke Lower Chinookan, a language related to the Chinookan of groups lining the Columbia eastward to the vicinity of The Dalles. Estimates based on observations from the early 1800s place their numbers at 1,100, among a total Lower Columbia population of more than 10,000.

People of the lower Columbia were blessed with an abundance of natural resources and the skills and experience with which to make use of them. During spring and summer, life revolved around fishing. Salmon and sturgeon were caught with weirs, hooks, nets, and spears, their annual return ensured by careful ritual observances and taboos. Small candlefish or eulachon, taken with rakes and dip-nets, were strung together and dried for storage or traded to upriver groups. Roots, berries, and a variety of other plants were harvested as they ripened. Land mammals, birds, shellfish, and marine mammals were caught, though as food resources these were secondary in importance to fish. Winters were spent in rectangular split-cedar plank houses, the largest of which measured 40 by 100 feet and could accommodate four families along with their slaves and visitors.

The earliest detailed observations of Lower Chinookan lifeways are contained in the accounts of the American explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark from the winter of 1805/1806: "Having acquired much of their language, we are enabled with the assistance of gestures to hold conversations with great ease. We find them inquisitive and loquacious, with understandings by no means deficient in acuteness, and with very retentive memories…To all our inquiries they answer with great intelligence, and the conversation rarely slackens, since there is a constant discussion of events, trade, and politics…"

Chinook villages were politically independent, but linked by ties of kinship and commerce. At the head of each village or village cluster was a chief, whose duties included the settling of conflicts, as well as the supervision of trade and warfare.

Like other native peoples of the Northwest Coast, the Chinook placed great emphasis on rank, status, and wealth. High ranking individuals formed what has been referred to as an upper class, which included chiefs and their families, prominent shamans, warriors, traders, and others of high birth. Together with individuals of lower rank, or "commoners," they were freemen, who could own slaves obtained through raids or purchase. Theirs was the prerogative to flatten the foreheads of their children, a privilege that was denied to slaves and served as a visible reminder of their position.

Early accounts often emphasize the influence of women in Chinook society. Freed from some of the everyday drudgery by the labor of slaves and a broad sharing of domestic tasks between the sexes, women were free to participate in such activities as trade and fishing. To quote Lewis and Clark again: "The females are permitted to speak freely before the men, to whom indeed they sometimes address themselves in a tone of authority. On many subjects their judgments are respected, and in matters of trade their advice is generally asked and pursued."

And trade was a passion among the Chinook. Lower Chinookan territory combined a strategic location at the crossroads of major aboriginal trade routes extending up and down the coast and inland with a rich environment that permitted the production of economic surpluses beyond what was needed for steady local consumption. As middlemen, the Clatsop and Chinook traded foodstuffs, dressed hides, canoes, and slaves. They also controlled much of the flow of dentalium shells into the interior. Used as currency throughout the Pacific Northwest, these small, tusk-shaped shells were traded as far away as the Dakotas—as early as A.D. 250. Trade gradually was facilitated by the use of Chinook Jargon, a trade language or *lingua franca* used by speakers of one hundred or more mutually unintelligible languages east to the Rockies and from Alaska south almost to the California border.

Thus Gray's crew, and other fur traders at the mouth of the Columbia River, were met by native peoples eager to engage in trade and adept at manipulating the exchange. In the early years, at least, the gains were mutual.

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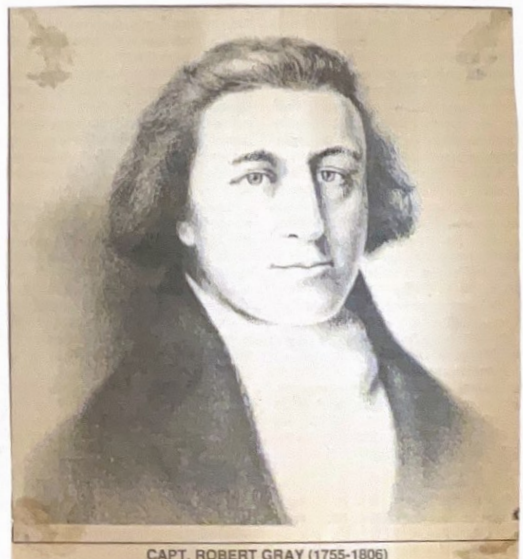

CAPT. ROBERT GRAY (1755-1806)